

RELIGION

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Theology and the University *

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My purposes are modest: simply to explore the topic, to propose conceptual structures in terms of which understanding of it may be increased, and perhaps to provide some increased understanding.

Some historical background.

It has been pointed out that two strains can be identified in the New Testament. One is an apparent anti-intellectualism, aloof from culture, distrustful of the mind. "At that time Jesus declared, 'I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes'" (Mt. 11:25). "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing . . ." (I Cor. 1:18). "For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart'" (Isa. 29:14). "For consider your call, brethren; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise . . ." (vs. 19, 26, 27). It should be pointed out that Paul's anti-intellectualism was not a matter of making a virtue out of necessity. He was one man in the early church who had done the intellectual labor which permitted him to make these strictures on the intellect.

The other strain, however, reveals theological scholarship. Jesus was a student of the Scriptures, one who was confident enough to say, "You have heard . . . but I say." John's Prologue was the work of a scholar. Paul was not only a witness to the good news of Jesus Christ but also a scholar who could quote secular writers. The Epistle to the Hebrews is the work of a man who knew not only the Old Testament but also the world of Hellenistic thought. Granting Kierkegaard's distinction between an apostle and a genius, it must be admitted that these men were scholars.

The early church soon had to decide whether it would cut itself off from the world of scholars or plunge into this world with the risks that that would entail. By the end of the second century the answer was clear. Justin Martyr, the chief of the Apologists, moved boldly into the world of philosophy in his witness to Christian faith. Irenaeus was a

man of extremely wide learning. In the third century, Clement of Alexandria was perhaps the first professional scholar who engaged in Christian theology (he cited more than three hundred fifty profane authors), and his pupil, Origen, was a man of prodigious intellectual output. Even Tertullian, who is noted for not wanting to confuse theology with philosophy, Jerusalem with Athens, was a scholar who coined more than nine hundred new words (many of them now forgotten, but others, such as trinity, merit, satisfaction, and sacrament, still being very much with us). Augustine was a scholar prior to his conversion, but his scholarship was enhanced and accelerated by his new-found Christian faith. Throughout the so-called Dark Ages which were to follow, it was Christian theologians who kept the light of scholarship alive in the Western world. When we come to the Reformers, we find a particularly scholarly group: Erasmus, Luther, Melancthon, Bucer, Calvin, Zwingli, and Cranmer. Christian scholars continued to be intellectual leaders of the Western world on into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, although by this time the scene begins to change.

The rise of the modern mind.

From the seventeenth century there has been an acceleration of what has been called "the rise of the modern mind." This has been a post-medieval, scientific mentality which has increasingly little place for traditional orthodox Christian theology. It is an earth-bound point of view which tends to be humanistic, materialistic, and secular. In this new framework man presumably is sufficient unto himself. Dogma is to be replaced by free inquiry. Religion is seen as a dogmatic stricture on such free inquiry and a fetter to the growth of the human spirit. This new mentality could produce some impressive credentials. It was able to cut through the accumulated backlog of a millennium of superstition. It was able to break through to new scientific and philosophical perspectives. Science was able to produce tangible results which led to technological advance and a rise in the standard of living. Philosophy was freed to engage in speculative outreaches which were to result in great idea systems. In the midst of these impressive achievements, it seemed inevitable that theology would recede from the scene and that men would be attracted to the new, liberating disciplines of science and

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philosophy. This is, in fact, what happened in many cases. It is in the light of this modern development that we face today the problem of theology in the university.

Responses of the theologians.

Unfortunately, the theologians made some incredibly bad responses to the rise of the modern mind. Generally speaking, there were two approaches to be made. One was an obscurantist, scholastic, or possibly anti-intellectual dogmatism which shut its eyes to the new discoveries of modern man. The history of the rise of science is marred by numerous incidents in which churchmen refused to look in telescopes or in other graphic ways showed their inability to come to terms with the new learning. The theologies which were produced by those who took this negative approach to culture tended to repeat the formulas which had been powerful in the past but which had now lost their power because of the disconnection from the new world of human thought. Reformation theology, which in the sixteenth century had been a liberation for the human spirit, was in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries for the most part the repetition of tired dogma. The ecumenical creeds of the third, fourth, and fifth centuries, which had been hammered out in the midst of an encounter with culture, now became a refuge from culture. Where this negative approach prevailed, theology could have little chance of commanding respect in the world of the university.

An opposite response was also made by other theologians. This was to accommodate to the new culture, to adopt its norms, to surrender anything in Christian faith which seemed contrary to the modern mind, and to let science be the norm of theology. The prototype of this approach was Schleiermacher, who attempted to reconstruct the whole Christian theology on the basis of empirical psychology. It was a revolutionary and heroic achievement when he wrote his *Speeches to the Cultured Despisers of Religion*. Here he attempted to speak to the modern mind in a way which would commend the Christian faith to those who accepted the norms of a new culture. What was not immediately observed, however, was that his *Speeches* made no converts. Even if they had, the question can be raised as to whether these converts would have been distinctly Christian or whether they would have been merely religious in some vaguely mystical way. The problem was that a theology which simply accommodates itself to culture can no longer speak prophetically.

In the midst of this dilemma, the churches tended to turn to pietism and anti-intellectualism. In many places, especially in America, there was the abandonment of the Reformation ideal of a learned ministry. Religion became a matter of feeling, of religious experience, of personal morality, and of traditional churchmanship. It became a compartment of life, not a transformer of life.

This development was not conducive to the construction of creative theology. If Christian faith is almost entirely a matter of the affections and of personal morality, there is not much stimulus to engage in intellectual discipline concerning the faith or to state it in such ways that it can be heard amidst the cogent, clamoring voices of the university.

The shift to technology.

Alongside this retreat into pietism, the modern mind itself made a subtle shift. The vast speculative philosophical constructions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries became discredited for many reasons, and at the same time the outcome of modern science was a technology which was dazzling in its practical achievements. This meant that in the world

of the universities there was a decline of the humanities, a change in emphasis to science, and a shift within scientific inquiry to technology, or to the narrower concern for technological achievement. With the decline of the humanities, theology found itself more friendless than ever.

Alongside this decline of the humanities, another development on the American scene was to contribute further to the decline of theology in the university. That is the rise of the state university and of the large secular private university. In the state universities religion was usually excluded on legal grounds relating to the separation of church and state. Lest the state universities be accused unduly of contributing to the decline of theology, however, it should be pointed out that the private universities and liberal arts colleges also tended to exclude theology from their curricula.

Pressures on students.

When we consider the students who come to the university today, we find that there are pressures on them which make it highly improbable that they will study theology either as a major inquiry or as an elective enrichment. The models of our time are not the theologian, the biblical scholar, or the minister. Today's models are the achievers in business, science, and politics. How many teen-agers today are ever stage struck by a theologian? How many of them engage in biblical studies with the same zest with which they approach political science or modern literature?

They are also under the pressure of scholarships. When I was preparing to enter college, there were very few scholarships available. Now they are available in great number and in large sizes—granted that one is going into some field of science or technology. Scholarships are less available in the humanities, and they are fairly nonexistent for theology at the undergraduate level.

The intellectual life of the local church, furthermore, is not often pitched for the superior student. The average local youth program is aimed at the average young person, and the superior student finds little to challenge him. He is not being guided into rigorous theological reading; he is not being introduced to modern techniques of biblical study; and he is not being challenged in the direction of a theological and prophetic criticism of culture. He sees the church as an amiable group of people who are comfortable and fairly unconcerned about engaging in difficult problems. If he does have a burning concern for social justice, for economic and political reform, or for world peace, for instance, he is more likely to find organizations outside the church which will give him guidance and support.

This problem of anti-theological pressures on the students can be seen when we consider the statistics issued by the National Merit Scholarship Corporation for the 1963 National Merit Scholars. There were a total of 1,528 National Merit Scholars in 1963. Three hundred fifty-nine of these indicated that they intended to engage in scientific research. Three hundred thirty-eight indicated that they planned to be teachers. One hundred ninety-nine planned to go into engineering. One hundred twenty-three planned to go into medical science. Sixty-nine planned to study law. A number of the other categories follow with lesser numbers, and finally, near the end, there were eighteen out of the 1,528 who planned to go into the ministry. It should be pointed out that of these eighteen who planned to enter the ministry, some will be deflected from this goal after four years in a college or university where there is no religion department or where the religion department is not treated with respect.

Thus we see that the problem of theology in the university is assuming new forms and is now extremely urgent.

What should theology be doing?

There are those who do not deplore the present decline of theology. It is just, they say, that in this modern world theology should fade from the scene. These are the disciples of August Comte's doctrine of the three stages of culture. Comte taught that human culture had gone through three stages: the theological, the philosophical, and the scientific. That means that both theology and philosophy are pre-scientific and deserve to fade away in an age of science. I should mention that many people consciously or unconsciously hold to this view whether they have heard of Comte or not. It is still very much the presupposition of modern man.

These critics of theology like to describe theology as a conflict over mere words. Professor Jaroslav Pelikan, the noted Lutheran theologian, surprisingly observes that these critics of theology are right in describing it as a conflict over words. He goes on to speak, however, of "a reverence for what language can do if it is used properly, and a horror of what language can do if it is misused." "This reverence," he says, "belongs to the equipment of the educated man." He quotes E. B. White, who said, "Muddiness is not merely a disturber of prose; it is a destroyer of life, of hope; death on the highways caused by a badly worded road sign, heart-break among lovers caused by a misplaced phrase in a well-intentioned letter, anguish of a traveler expecting to be met at a railroad station and not being met because of a slipshod telegram." Pelikan continues: "And, let the theologian add, betrayal of the faith once handed down to the saints by careless or deliberate ambiguity in the language of theology or devotion." This is a call, he says, to faith, hope, and clarity. This means that theology deals with the most fundamental human question and is by no means a peripheral concern, even in an age of science, for it deals with the word, the basic human meaning, the eternal Word made flesh. Pelikan goes on: "Perhaps, like the Irish monasteries of that earlier age, the Christian college may quietly cultivate the humanistic disciplines until their hour strikes again. Perhaps a generation that learns Russian on account of the Sputniks may go on to read Dostoevski in his own language. If we wait long enough, the poignancy of the human situation may persuade someone to take another look at the language of Sophocles, Aeschylus, Plato, and Paul" (Jaroslav Pelikan, "The Christian as an Intellectual," *The Christian Scholar*, Spring, 1962). This leads me to observe that those university scholars who accuse theology of being abstruse speculation over mere words are usually abstruse enough themselves in their own discipline. Their demand for clarity in theology is reasonable in some respect but is unreasonable in others. They often fail to understand that theology is an intellectual discipline with historical depth, philosophical ramifications, and a technical language. While clarity is its goal, it cannot short-cut the hard, disciplined work of intellectual labor. It is unfair, then, for a specialist in some other discipline to demand immediate clarity from the theologian. Rather, the theologians and the other specialists need to take time to learn to hear each other in one another's language. This will require a price that is seldom being paid on either side of the fence today. One of the problems of such communication can be likened to the problem of the speed of light. When we look into the heavens, we do not see what is going on currently amidst the stars. We see, rather, their past, for the distance is so great that light is taking many years to reach us. Should there be observers of us out there on some planet, they also do not see us in our present situation, but they only see us as we were four years ago, or perhaps four thousand or four million years ago. I observe

that the characterizations of theology which are made by men from other disciplines are often caricatures of what is really going on amidst theologians today. These caricatures are the more distorted because they are constructed without any knowledge of present theological developments. At the same time, theologians are often guilty of dealing with science and humanities in dated clichés. If this situation is to be remedied, the work of theology must be carried on in the midst of the university, both for the sake of the university and for the sake of theology.

If I may be so bold, I would like to suggest also that anti-intellectualism is not always on the side of the theologian. It can be present also in a technologically oriented educational system which is afraid of pure intellectual work. I am reminded of the bold and pointed words of the eminent British mystery story writer and theologian, Miss Dorothy Sayers, who wrote a few years back in an open letter as follows: "The only letter I ever wanted to address to average people is one that says: Why don't you take the trouble to find out what is Christianity and what isn't? Why, when you can bestir yourself to learn technical terms about electricity, won't you do as much for theology before you begin to argue?"

"... Why do you want a letter from me telling you about God? You will never bother to check up on it and find out whether I am giving you a personal opinion or the Church's doctrine. Go away and do some work" (quoted from *Faculty Christian Fellowship Bulletin*, January, 1959).

The function of a theological faculty in the midst of the university, then, is to bring discipline and skill to the task of uncovering and assessing not only the theology that is taught by the ecclesiastical church, but also the theology that is already present in the university. It should not be supposed that universities, by excluding theology from their curriculum, thereby exclude theology. Theology is implicit in the actions, doctrine, and attitude, of every professor. This is not to say, either, that there is no good theology in the university. The theology may be indeed very good. In this connection I would like to use a term coined by Samuel Miller of Harvard, "the non-ecclesiastical acts of God." This is to say that it is quite possible that God is working in the midst of the so-called secular university. The task of the theologian in the university then is to identify, evaluate, describe, and make articulate this working of God in the midst of culture. He is in a position, then, also to make a prophetic criticism of cultural forms and values and to make contributions to these forms.

This is not an easy task. We have reached a point where we must get beyond the idea that a basically anti-intellectual approach to theology is adequate. Theology is something more than a weekend discussion at a religious foundation. Theology is something more than fun. It involves intellectual discipline. It involves long, sustained, hard, biblical, linguistic, historical, philosophical, and systematic studies. It cannot be done in one's spare time. It cannot be led by a non-professional and do the job that is necessary in today's world. While I have great respect for the campus religious foundations, I simply must say that they are not adequate to the total task. If the voice of theology is to be heard in the universities, it must be heard at the level of the faculty. That means that there must be men who can engage in the academic dialogue with the proper credentials and skills.

I should say, furthermore, that the church needs the university. American higher education has progressed in such a way that it has become almost impossible for the church and the university to have any real engagement with one another. There is a growing realization, however, that such an engagement is necessary, that religion departments in the

university must somehow be established, and that this is true not only for the sake of the university but also for the sake of the church. The total health of the church itself is at stake.

Conclusion.

It is for these reasons that I acknowledge with joy the

presence of the Kansas School of Religion in the midst of The University of Kansas. It has been fulfilling a task which is essential for university and for church, and the future need and potential are both great. I commend those who are responsible for this worthy and strategic venture in the midst of the educational situation of our time.

The Institute on Religion, Education and the Law

This was held on September 29 and 30 in the Student Union building. Kansas School of Religion participated in sponsoring this program, along with the K.U. School of Law and the Project, Religious Freedom and Public Affairs of the National Conference of Christians and Jews. Over 100 lawyers, educators, clergymen, and interested citizens attended.

The program was designed to focus attention on certain timely issues affecting the fields of religion, education, and law in common, namely, the problems of religion in public schools and public support of church schools. The aim was to develop a dialogue among the several professional, religious, and academic disciplines, and through the dialogue to promote better understanding of the issues and proposed solutions. Several nationally well-known authorities delivered the principal addresses, and several highly qualified local Kansas leaders provided additional perspective.

Dr. Franklin Littell, Professor of Church History at Chicago Theological Seminary, compared the health of uncoerced religion in our pluralistic free society with that of religion in Europe where established state churches have been predominant. He concluded that high-grade, theistic religion flourishes only where it is uncoerced. Practices such as prayer and Bible reading as part of the official exercises of compulsory public schools disserve the interests of both the state and religion. On the other hand, he noted, the state cannot ignore religion, and it cannot assume a position of hostility to it. The public schools and universities may have a responsibility to provide courses designed to promote the understanding of religion and its role in human life and society.

Professor Robert Casad of the University of Kansas School of Law pre-



CARL BANGS

sented a theory by which the constitutional validity of religiously oriented activities in public schools might be estimated. This test was based on the First and Fourteenth Amendments to the Constitution and the holdings of the Supreme Court. The validity of a practice depends upon a balancing of four significant factors: (a) the degree of direct or indirect compulsion involved; (b) the degree of financial support by the state; (c) the relative importance of the religious as compared to the secular purpose served by the practice in question; (d) the relative extent to which one faith or denomination may be preferentially favored (non-religion being treated as a "faith" for this purpose).

Professor Everett Kircher of the Ohio State University School of Education discussed some of the educational values of religion and religious values of education. While considering some curricular attention to religious subject matter desirable, he pointed out some of the practical problems. Among the more serious

were, how should religious subject matter be presented, and where are the books and teachers to come from? These in turn pose problems for the public universities and teachers colleges that train the nation's teachers.

Dr. George La Noue, now at Columbia University Teachers College, but formerly guest scholar at the Brookings Institution and consultant to the National Council of Churches, presented the problem of public support for church-related schools. By tracing the Supreme Court's decisions he concluded that equal public support of public and church-related schools would be unconstitutional, but that latitude remains for some public support where it takes the form of benefits for the parochial school children, even though such aid would provide some indirect encouragement to parochial schools. Monsignor Henry Gardner, Diocesan Superintendent of Schools, Kansas City, Kansas, responded to this "child benefit theory" approach by pointing out that this would not provide enough aid to permit parochial schools to continue. Dean Francis Heller, Professor of Political Science and Associate Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at K.U. shared Monsignor Gardner's view of the inadequacy of support as limited by the child benefit theory.

In his summary of the Institute Rabbi Arthur Gilbert, Director of the Project, Religious Freedom and Public Affairs of the N.C.C.J. noted the difficulty and profundity of the issues posed by the Institute. He emphasized the necessity of continuing the dialogue. The Kansas School of Religion stands as a principal forum for interfaith and interdenominational dialogue in this part of the country, and will become increasingly prominent in this respect in the coming years.

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